# Robert Tressell (1870 —1911)

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Robert Tressell (17 April 1870 — 3 February 1911) was the nom-de-plume of Robert Croker, latterly Robert Noonan, an Irish writer best known for his novel The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists.

## Early life

Tressell was born in Dublin, Ireland, the illegitimate son of Samuel Croker, a senior member of the Royal Irish Constabulary. He was baptized and raised a Roman Catholic. His father, who wasn't Catholic, had his own family, but attempted to provide for Robert until his death in 1875.

Tressell had, in the words of his daughter, Kathleen, "a very good education" and could speak a variety of languages. However, when he was sixteen, he showed signs of a radical political consciousness, and left his family, declaring he "would not live on the family income derived largely from absentee landlordism". Around this time he changed his surname from Croker to "Noonan", his mother's maiden name.[1]

## [edit] Adult life

### [edit] South Africa

In 1888, Tressell moved to Cape Town, South Africa, where, despite not having an apprenticeship, he became a painter and decorator. When he married in 1891, he was recorded as Robert Phillipe Noonan, Decorator. The marriage was an unhappy one, with his wife having numerous affairs after the birth of their daughter, Kathleen. They divorced in 1895, and Tressell acquired all the property, including their house in an affluent suburb of Cape Town.

Tressell and his daughter moved to Johannesburg, where he secured a well-paying job with a construction company. It was here that he learned the ways of the industry he would later write about in his novel, although Tressell's actual circumstances varied greatly from the proletarian characters of the book. After becoming Secretary of the Transvaal Federated Building Trades Council, he was able to afford to send his daughter to an exclusive convent school and also to employ a black manservant named Sixpence, of whom he was said to be "very fond".

In 1897, Tressell led a successful protest against the employment of black skilled labour. During 1898, he became a member of the Transvaal Executive Committee of the Centennial of 1798 Association, which commemorated the revolutionary nationalist United Irishmen.[citation needed]

As a '98 Association member, Tressell helped form the Irish Brigades, an anti-British force that fought alongside the Boers in the Second Boer War. At this point, accounts of his life differ. Some assert he took up arms and was interned by the British until the end of the war, when he returned

to Britain. Others say he left South Africa just before hostilities began in October 1899.[citation needed]

[edit] England

In any event, around the turn of the century, Tressell ended up in Hastings, Sussex. Here, he found work as a sign writer, but at much lower wages and in far poorer conditions than he had experienced in South Africa. Kathleen was initially sent to boarding and convent schools, but eventually could no longer afford them and attended state schools instead.[2]

Tressell had to take part-time jobs in addition to his full-time position. He seems not to have joined a trade union. For a while, his political beliefs appeared to have moved rightwards, like many leading socialists of the time, to a more social-chauvinistic and anti-German viewpoint.[citation needed]

In sharp contrast to the days when he aided and perhaps fought with the Boers against Britain's imperialism, he now was designing aircraft, which he hoped would be accepted by the War Office. In 1905, his designs were rejected, and he turned leftwards once again. Influenced by the quasi-Marxist ideas of designer and socialist William Morris, he joined the Social Democratic Federation in 1906. The next year, after a dispute with his employer, Tressell lost his job. Despite the demand for his skills, his health began to deteriorate and he eventually developed tuberculosis. Unemployed and unable to remain politically active, he started writing, something he hoped would earn enough money to keep him from the workhouse.[citation needed]

He wrote under the pen name Robert Tressell as he feared the socialist views expressed in the book would have him blacklisted. He chose the surname Tressell as a pun on the trestle table, an important part of a painter and decorator's kit. (Until the full manuscript was published in 1955, all copies of the book cited the author as Robert "Tressall".) He completed The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists in 1910, but the 1,600-page hand-written manuscript was rejected by the three publishing houses. The rejections severely depressed him, and his daughter had to save the manuscript from being burnt. It was placed for safekeeping in a metal box underneath her bed.[citation needed]

[edit] Death

Unhappy with his life in Britain, he decided that he and Kathleen should emigrate to Canada, however, he only reached Liverpool when he was admitted to the Royal Liverpool Infirmary Workhouse, where he died of phthisis pulmonalis, a lung disease, on 3 February 1911, aged 40.

He was buried in a mass grave with twelve other paupers opposite Walton prison in Liverpool. The location of the grave was not discovered until 1970. The plot is now marked at a cemetery at the same location, now called Rice Lane City Farm. A nearby road is named Noonan Close.

[edit] Posthumous publication

Kathleen mentioned her father's novel to a friend of hers, writer Jessie Pope, who recommended it to her publisher. In April 1914, the publisher bought the rights to the book for £25, and it appeared in Britain, Canada and the United States later that year, in the Soviet Union in 1920, and in Germany in 1925. The version as originally published was heavily abridged by Pope, with much of the socialist ideology removed. Pope's version ended with the novel's hero, Frank Owen, who taught that "money was the cause of poverty", contemplating suicide.[citation needed]

The original manuscript was subsequently located by Tressell advocate F. C. Ball and, after raising funds to acquire and re-assemble Tressell's version, an unabridged edition was published in 1955. The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists has won approval from the political left and some academics. It has been cited as a factor in the landslide Labour victory in 1945,[3] and even for the election of two non-Labour-endorsed Communist members of Parliament that same year.

[edit] Use of Tressell's name

Tressell's name has been used over the years by various groups and individuals, mainly in and around Hastings:

- The Robert Tressell Workshop — a publishing concern based in Hastings.
- Robert Tressell Close — a small residential street in Hastings named after the writer.
- Tressell Ward — a political ward in Hastings.
- The Robert Tressell Lectures — a series of annual lectures concerning not only The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, but also other aspects of left-wing politics and sociology.
- Tressell Publications — a small politically based publishing house.
- Robert Tressell Halls of Residence — accommodation for students studying at University Centre Hastings.